

## The Gender Gap in Censorship Support

By Cory Clark

Across decades, topics, and studies, women are more censorious than men. Compared to men, women support more censorship of various kinds of sexual and violent content and content perceived as hateful or otherwise offensive to minorities.

Women are more supportive of illegalizing insults of immigrants, homosexual individuals, transgender individuals, the police, African Americans, Hispanics, Muslims, Jewish people, and Christians, and are more supportive of banning sexually explicit public statements and flag burning. In contrast, men evaluate free speech as more important than do women.

One likely reason for this pattern is that women are more averse to interpersonal harm and have relatively stronger concern for protecting others. Indeed, women believe sexual media content has more harmful effects on the self and others, and women view hate speech as more harmful and violent than do men.

Although support for censorship is often associated with authoritarianism, it likely is motivated—at least in part—by desires to protect others from harm. In the communications literature, the third person effect refers to a tendency for people to view others (compared to the self) as particularly vulnerable to media content, especially for negative or potentially harmful media. And those with larger self-other vulnerability gaps tend to be more supportive of censorship.

The higher sensitivity to harm among women likely influences how women weigh the tradeoffs regarding freedom of expression vs. the protection of vulnerable others.

For example, in a 2019 report by the Knight Foundation, 59% of women said that promoting an inclusive society is more important than protecting free speech, whereas 71% of men said that protecting free speech is the more important value. Moreover, 58% of college men said it is never acceptable to shout down a speaker, whereas only 41% of women agreed that it is never acceptable to do so.

### Significance to Academic Freedom

Of greater consequence for the pursuit of truth and rigorous scholarship, this higher sensitivity to harm among women likely influences how women weigh the tradeoffs regarding *academic freedom* vs. the protection of vulnerable others.

For example, a majority of men believe that colleges should *not* protect their students from offensive ideas, whereas a majority of women believe colleges should do so. Male students rated advancing knowledge and academic rigor as higher in value and social justice and emotional well-being as lower in value relative to female students. And in a 2021 report by Eric

Kaufmann, female scholars in the US and Canada were more likely than men to support firing a scholar for controversial research.

I have observed similar patterns in some of my own work. For example, in a very recent study I conducted with 440 online adults (I will add a preprint link when it is available), participants rated the offensiveness of excerpts from the discussion sections of five published (and potentially or demonstrably controversial) scientific papers. These papers included findings that (1) female protégés benefit more when they have male than female mentors; (2) there is no evidence of racial discrimination against ethnic minorities in police shootings; (3) activating Christian concepts increases racial prejudice; (4) children with same-sex parents are no worse off than children with opposite sex parents; and (5) experiencing child sexual abuse does not cause severe and long-lasting psychological harm. Note all these studies were published in high impact scientific journals, but two of them have since been retracted and one was officially condemned by Congress.

Women found all scientific findings more offensive than men, except for the same-sex marriage findings (which both men and women rated as not at all offensive). And broadly, women reported stronger agreement with the statement that some scientific findings should be censored because they are too dangerous.

In an ongoing project, I have found that this gender gap in censorship support might be smaller among young adults, with both young men and young women having censorship preferences similar to adult women.

In one study with 559 online adults, participants read five passages from books (that were made up for purposes of this study) and reported their desires to censor those books by indicating their agreement with statements like, “They should remove the book from the library” and “A professor should not be allowed to require the book for class.” The passages included one containing swear words, one containing a gory description, one arguing that there are evolved sex differences in leadership ability, one arguing that certain religions inspire violence, and one arguing that there are race differences in intelligence test scores. Across all five statements, women were more censorious than men.

A follow-up study replicated these exact methods with 1,057 young adults (a mix of undergraduates and online young adults). In this study, women were more censorious of the swearing and gore passages, but there were no gender differences in support for censorship for the passages regarding gender differences, race differences, or religion and violence. Young adults were more censorious than older adults overall, but this difference was larger among men, such that young men support censorship at levels similar to women.

It is unclear whether this is an age effect (i.e., whether men come to support censorship less as they age), or whether this is a cohort effect (i.e., whether younger generations hold censorship views more similar to women’s).

Balancing support for academic freedom with support for an inclusive and protective environment is an old and persistent challenge. In an ideal world, the two would never come into conflict and we could fearlessly pursue truth without ever stumbling upon information that offends others or makes them feel unwelcome.

Given ongoing conflicts and concerns about academic freedom, it seems we do not inhabit this ideal world, and thus people must weigh this complicated tradeoff and make decisions in borderline cases. In such cases, women may be more likely than men to favor protective and inclusive environments, whereas men may be more likely than women to favor protecting academic freedom.

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